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ABSTRACT

Alternative work patterns are work schedules that allow employees to select the hours and length of their workweeks. Reasons for choosing alternative work patterns include transportation considerations, participation in outside activities, ability to work better during certain hours, child care, and household commitments. Examples of alternative work patterns include: (1) flextime; (2) job sharing; (3) reduced worktime; (4) leisure sharing; (5) compressed workweek; (6) part-time employment; and (7) tapered employment. If alternative work patterns become part of the normal work pattern, education will have to address the needs of individuals in the midlife stage. Implications for companies will be in the areas of tuition aid, retraining, and career development. Recent surveys indicate that the preference of employees is to give up wages for time away from their jobs. The major reasons for choosing alternative work patterns seem to be to have additional free time to enhance the quality of life, to increase education and retraining, and to allow for better transition to retirement years. This fact sheet includes a bibliography of three resources which are available from the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system. (DC)

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Alternative Work Patterns as Innovations in the Work Place.

OVERVIEW: ERIC Fact Sheet No. 19.

by

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ERIC OVERVIEW

FACT SHEET No. 19

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

ALTERNATIVE WORK PATTERNS AS INNOVATIONS IN THE WORK PLACE

Alternative work patterns are work schedules that allow employees to select the hours and length of their workweeks. Both blue-collar and white-collar workers of any age, sex, or employment level can benefit from this flexibility and convenience. The idea of alternative work patterns was initially conceived to avoid rush hours, to accommodate working mothers, and to encourage the use of carpools. Later work plans were expanded to allow workers the freedom to participate in other nonpaid activities (e.g., education, volunteer work, community activities, or personal commitments). Since some people work more effectively at certain hours of the day or night, flexible work patterns allow them to design their work schedules to coincide with these hours. Other workers need to consider child care and/or household commitments, and may adjust their work hours to accommodate these concerns. Some workers prefer daylight hours for recreational endeavors and may schedule evening hours for work. There are various alternative work patterns; some examples are discussed below.

Examples of Alternative Work Patterns

Flextime is a type of work pattern enabling workers to regulate their hours of employment, but requiring a set number of work hours. The standard method is to regulate the arrival and departure hours of workers each day. A more common plan is to vary these times daily, weekly, or monthly. Some hours can be carried over to another month, but with certain imposed limitations. Flextime has been a popular alternative work plan and success with it has been high. Some government employers, having used flextime schedules over a period of time, are now asking Congress to make flextime a permanent alternative work plan. Observers predict flextime will be expanded as the next generation of employees and employers note its advantages.

In job sharing several people jointly do the work equivalent to one full-time job. The fulltime salary and benefits are prorated, and are frequently higher than regular part-time positions. The quality of work is often higher than that produced through several part-time jobs of lower-level skills proficiency.

Reduced worktime is a plan to share available work by shortening the work-week or workday. The same pay and benefits remain, although the workers' total hours are reduced.

Leisure sharing is similar to reduced worktime, except that workers negotiate a portion of their wage for leisure time.

Compressed work week is a plan by which workers are employed for forty hours a week over fewer than five days. This plan results in four ten-hour days; or a three-day week with twelve- or thirteen-hour days; or the 5-4/9 plan, in which employees work four days one week and five days the following week.

Part-time employment is a permanent job requiring less than thirty-five hours a week. Women, youth, and older people particularly are choosing this type of employment in service-sector and career oriented jobs (i.e., those lower-level jobs that enable a person to move up the career ladder). Women like this plan because it provides them with career opportunities and increased time for child-rearing. The plan appeals to youth because they can receive student loans or enroll in training programs while being employed, yet still have time for socializing. Older workers may wish to decrease their work load because of health factors, preretirement planning, or the desire for increased leisure time.

Tapered employment allows workers to taper off their work schedule by accepting alternative work assignments, part-time work, or flextime prior to retirement. With this work alternative, retirement does not create disruption for the other personnel in the work situation, nor does it cause older workers to stop their work pattern suddenly. Older workers are a rich source of knowledge and experience that is important to our nation's productivity. After retirement, some older workers are employed part-time as consultants and use their expertise to solve problems and provide orientation for new workers; however, a recent trend is to implement tapered employment. Because retirement trends are changing and older workers may remain in the work force longer, tapered employment is a viable alternative employment plan.

Implications of Alternative Work Patterns

If alternative work structures become part of the normal work pattern, there will be implications for education and training. Workers' released time can accommodate educational endeavors. Traditionally, educational offerings have been planned to accommodate the needs of young people, but if individuals in the midlife stage began to attend classes in larger numbers, their needs might create a new dimension for educational services. Special consideration of midlife coursework would be appropriate for older women who would be entering or returning to the job market and may need training or retraining. Company administrators and union officials might negotiate tutition aid if it became evident that employees were interested in pursuing educational goals. Workers could attend classes because their work hours would be modified, or, with released work time, they could enroll in correspondence courses.

The factor of retraining is another dimension to alternative employment patterns. Are companies willing to help defray the costs of educational leave, on-the-job training, and skill upgrading? New technologies and changes in production and service will necessitate continued retraining and career development. Many places of business have internal, informal staff development programs, including lectures, seminars and workshops. Although these programs may not provide extensive training, they do update job information. Some companies have a formal external program, in the form of a degree program, that offers training for a second career. Companies and/or unions may provide on-campus educational programs, educational loans, scholarships, and tuition aid to their employees.

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Educational institutions offering educational programs for workers include higher and postsecondary institutions, public and private vocational and technical schools, employer-sponsored workshops and seminars, adult education workshops, seminars, and correspondence courses. In order for workers to take full advantage of educational programs, institutions need to offer flexible hours.

If the economy remains uncertain and unemployment continues to rise, the job sharing may becoma a crucial issue. Together with a demand for more jobs and the preference for part-time employment, job sharing may become an acceptable means of economic survival.

Recent survey studies of alternative work patterns and trends have revealed that the preference of employees is to give up wages for time away from their jobs. An important variation was the type of alternative free time that was offered. Most individuals (65.5 percent) would trade pay for extended vacations, and 65.3 percent would take a pay cut for sabbaticals. While 51.4 percent of persons surveyed would take a lower pay raise in order to retire earlier, 43.5 percent would eliminate pay increases in trade for longer weekends.

Although there are many personal reasons for choosing alternative work patterns, the following seem to be the major ones:

- To have additional free time to enhance the quality of life
- To increase education and retraining
- To allow for better transition to retirement years.

Ultimately, this change could lessen the economic costs of government programs for unemployed workers.

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This fact sheet was developed by Denie Denniston, at The National Center for Research in Vocational Education. Orders for National Center Publications should be sent to the Publications Office, Box E; or call 614-486-3655/800-848-4815.